

Perspectives In Learning

Volume 4 | Number 1


Article 12

1-2003

Considering the Possible Elimination of Foreign Language as a Requirement for a Georgia High School College-Prep Diploma

Kay Agnew

Follow this and additional works at: <http://csuepress.columbusstate.edu/pil>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Online and Distance Education Commons](#), [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Agnew, K. (2003). Considering the Possible Elimination of Foreign Language as a Requirement for a Georgia High School College-Prep Diploma. *Perspectives In Learning*, 4 (1). Retrieved from <http://csuepress.columbusstate.edu/pil/vol4/iss1/12>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at CSU ePress. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives In Learning by an authorized editor of CSU ePress.

PERSPECTIVES IN LEARNING

Volume 4; pp 36

Considering the Possible Elimination of Foreign Language as a Requirement for a Georgia High School College-Prep Diploma

By Kay Agnew

The front page headline informed readers of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (AJC) that an education initiative of serious importance was under consideration: "Adios, francais? Maybe in Georgia school board may end language requirement" (Salzer, Sept. 2002). This proposal before the state Board of Education became the source of tremendous controversy. It was reported that the Board was interested in exchanging the required two years of language for four years in both science and math. Salzer (Sept. 2002) wrote that Cathy Henson, chairwoman of the state Board of Education, was in favor of the change as many students have trouble earning a college-prep diploma due to the language requirement. Finally, it was suggested that the languages be moved to the elementary schools, as they may be the best training grounds for language, as "experts" have concluded that children are more adept at acquiring languages.

In the same article, Salzer (Sept. 2002) quoted several people who were opposed to such a change in requirements. Jana Sandarg, a Spanish professor at Augusta State University, argued that languages help students better understand other cultures, their own first languages, and analytical skills that are also useful in math. University System Chancellor Tom Meredith commented that such a move would not be appropriate for a state that is becoming increasingly diverse in population and global in business interests. Herb Garrett, a member of the state board's committee considering graduation requirements, said that Georgia could not mandate that elementary or middle schools take over language instruction. There current scarcity of language teachers does not match well with the fact that there are four times as many schools at the elementary or middle school level as there are high schools.

Within his article Salzer (Sept. 2002) included some general information to militate against the change to eliminate the high school language requirement:

- Georgia's Latino population increased 300% in the last decade.
- Georgia's Asian population increased 135% in the last decade.
- Some Georgia schools will have a Hispanic majority in 10 years.
- Foreign investment in Georgia doubled since 1999.
- Students with more than 2 years of language score higher on the SAT.
- Georgia's colleges and universities currently require 2 years of language.
- There is a fear that the change would result in fewer language offerings, limiting opportunities for students who want to attend out of state colleges.

The President of the University of Georgia, Michael Adams (Sept. 2002), wrote an editorial for the *AJC* in which he affirmed the university's commitment to a strong language program. Changing demographics of the state's population, our increasing international business associations, and matters of national security all contribute to the fact that the university has expanded its language offerings, and that the number of students minoring in foreign languages has increased by 65%. His feedback from employers of UGA's graduates was that they often value language facility over extra seemingly more career-oriented courses.

Marquette McKnight, Muscogee County member of the state Board of Education, said the board would not eliminate the language requirement (personal communication, November 11, 2002). She discussed several points of concern to the board in addressing graduation requirements and end of year testing. She said that a segment of high school students have a specific learning disability that makes the second year of language almost impossible to pass. Intensive study does not help them. She said that the board was discussing with state colleges the possibility of substituting two first-year classes in different languages for two years of study in the same. With all standardized tests showing that Georgia's students are not better prepared than they were twenty years ago, the board is looking for new ways to address problems. She questioned why SAT scores have not improved if the second year of language is so important. An extra year of math, she suggested, might have a greater impact on those scores. However, the board is also looking at strengthening the present secondary language program. McKnight suggested finding a way to teach language so that students would be fluent speakers after the second year, something that is not happening now. She spoke of another member of the board who was frustrated with language teachers who speak out to protect their jobs and condone the unsatisfactory status quo, rather than trying to raise standards. She said that the misinformation and publicity that sprang up so quickly and negatively produced more emails about this issue than she has seen about any other, and that the tone has been attacking.

James Salzer (2002) reported discussions at a public meeting held on November 13 (Salzer, Nov. 2002). Students, parents, and teachers came to urge the state board not to eliminate language requirements. Cathy Cox, newly-elected superintendent of the Georgia Department of Education, reaffirmed that she strongly supported language requirements, as has Governor-elect Sonny Perdue. Salzer (Nov. 2002) suggested that the election results have probably achieved what Georgia's citizens seem to want: studying foreign language will continue to be required for a college-prep high school diploma as well as for admissions to Georgia's colleges and universities.

An *AJC* staff editorial on November 15, 2002 may have been the last shot in the skirmish. Linda Wallinger, executive director of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, noted, "Students can't achieve high levels of proficiency studying a language an hour a day for 180 days." The editorial suggested that schools spend too much time on details like verb endings, and too little time on learning to communicate verbally in a second language. The issue now, the writer asserts, is not whether languages will be taught, but how effectively it will be done ("Our Opinions").

I agree with the journalists, educators, and general citizens who stress that cultural and financial issues make dropping the language requirement shortsighted. For example, how can we ignore the fact that Georgia is being flooded with speakers of other languages? I also agree that dropping the language requirement would be an irresistible invitation to many of our school systems to ease some financial headaches by eliminating language classes that suddenly would become expensive luxuries.

References

- Adams, M. (2002, September 30). "Foreign language readies students for college, life."
Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Retrieved October 18, 2002, from <http://www.ajc.com>.
- "Our opinions: Language lessons too tongue-tied." (2002, November 15).
Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Retrieved November 17, 2002, from <http://www.ajc.com>.
- Salzer, J. (2002, September 22). "Adios, francais? Maybe in Georgia school board may end language requirement." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Retrieved October 18, 2002, from <http://www.ajc.com>.
- Salzer, J. (2002, November 14). "School board hears case for foreign languages." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Retrieved November 17, 2002, from <http://www.ajc.com>.

Kay Agnew has taught for 22 years, principally at Pacelli High School in Columbus, Georgia, where she has been honored as STAR teacher three times. The Columbus Ledger-Enquirer named her as Page One Teacher of the Year in 1990. She holds an A.B. degree from Wesleyan College, an M.Ed. from UGA, and is currently pursuing the Ed.S. from Columbus State University, all in secondary English education.